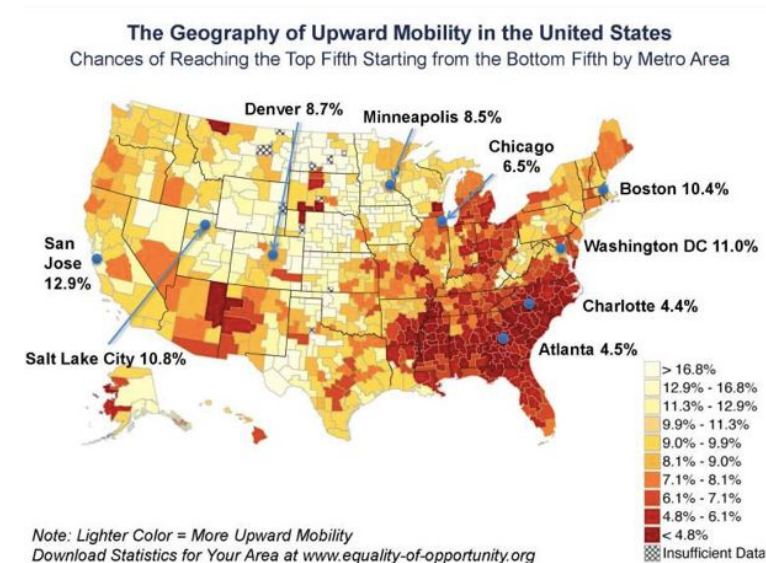


Understanding and Debunking the Bootstraps Myth Through The Framework of Partisan Values Based on Assignments 20 and 22

The 2018 *Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights on his Mission to the United States of America* published by the United Nations revealed the shocking extent and degree of poverty in the United States. In the report, the Special Rapporteur outlined the basic facts of poverty in the U.S.—“about 40 million live in poverty, 18.5 million in extreme poverty, and 5.3 million live in Third World conditions of absolute poverty.”¹ And, yet, like so many other issues, the poverty dilemma remains a partisan debate and not a humanitarian one. In this digital project, I will investigate how the value-based framework for understanding political views influences the perception of poverty in the U.S. and perpetuates the partisan divide on this issue. Specifically, I hope to debunk the “bootstrap” myth of poverty and explore why it is so appealing to conservatives as well as so present in the political discourse.

One particularly prevalent and damaging misconception about poverty in the United States is the idea that the poor can easily “lift themselves up by their bootstraps,” if, of course, they are willing to work hard enough. As discussed in the “Rags to Riches” podcast, this idea of upward mobility rose to prominence in the 18th and 19th Century and quickly became a

cornerstone of the American identity. During that period, the United States was the exception among countries in that it had no formalized aristocracy or enshrined legal/social impediments to upward mobility. Consequently, the “bootstraps” myth and the “land of opportunity” concept might have been relatively true at the time of their inception. They do not, however, represent a realistic view



¹ *Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights on His Mission to the United States of America*, report, Human Rights Council, The United Nations (United Nations, 2018).

of poverty and social mobility in 2018.²

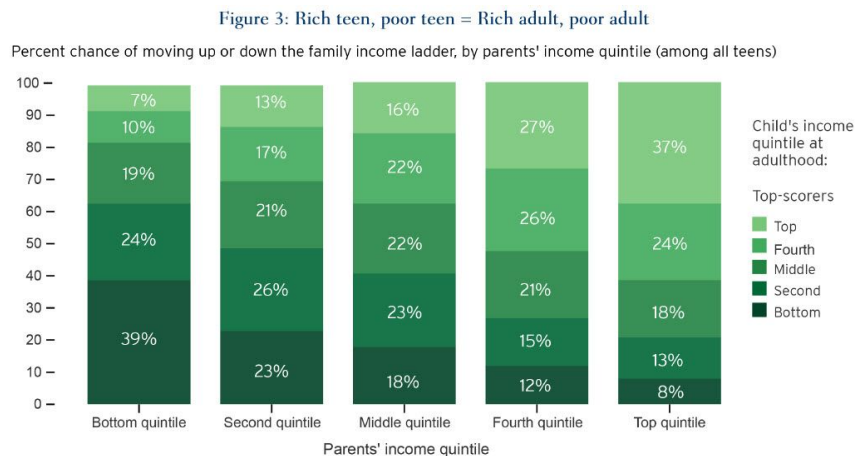
One issue with the idea of the United States as a land of social mobility is that socio-economic outcomes seem to be increasingly predetermined. As pointed out in the “Rags to Riches” podcast, half of a person’s future is determined by the situation they are born into. This idea is confirmed by the graphic on the previous page and by the UN report, which states that “the United States now has one of the lowest rates of intergenerational social mobility of any of the rich countries. Zip Codes, which are usually reliable proxies for race and wealth, are tragically reliable predictors of a child’s future employment and income prospects.”³ Both of these accounts show that, while there is no formal barrier between the poor and upward mobility, informal hurdles do exist. Some of these challenges might be related to race, education, religion, food security, or gang violence. Either way, the lives of today’s poor are a far cry from the idealized version set forth by the American dream.

The graph shown at right also demonstrates the fact that a child’s station in life has a great deal to do with his or her parents’ financial

situation.⁴ Children born into the poorest quintile of the population in terms of income have a 39% chance of remaining in that position and only a 7% chance of moving to the top quintile. Children born into the top quintile, however, have a 37% chance of remaining there. The graph

provides evidence that our society does not give everyone the equal start it purports to. In fact, it puts a vast majority of the population at a disadvantage from the start.

Despite these facts, the notion of the bootstrap myth continues to play an integral role in the public discourse surrounding poverty and is often featured in conservative arguments against social safety net programs. The reason this myth continues to be relevant regardless of the facts



² Graphic: Chetty, Raj. "The Geography of Upward Mobility in the United States." Digital image. Brookings Institution. June 2, 2015.

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brookings-now/2015/06/02/these-maps-from-raj-chetty-show-that-where-children-grow-up-has-a-major-impact-on-their-lifetime-earnings/>.

³ *Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights on His Mission to the United States of America*, report, Human Rights Council, The United Nations (United Nations, 2018), 5.

⁴ Graphic: Richard V. Reeves and Joanna Venator, "Rich Teen, Poor Teen= Rich Adult, Poor Adult," digital image, Brookings Institution, December 4, 2013,

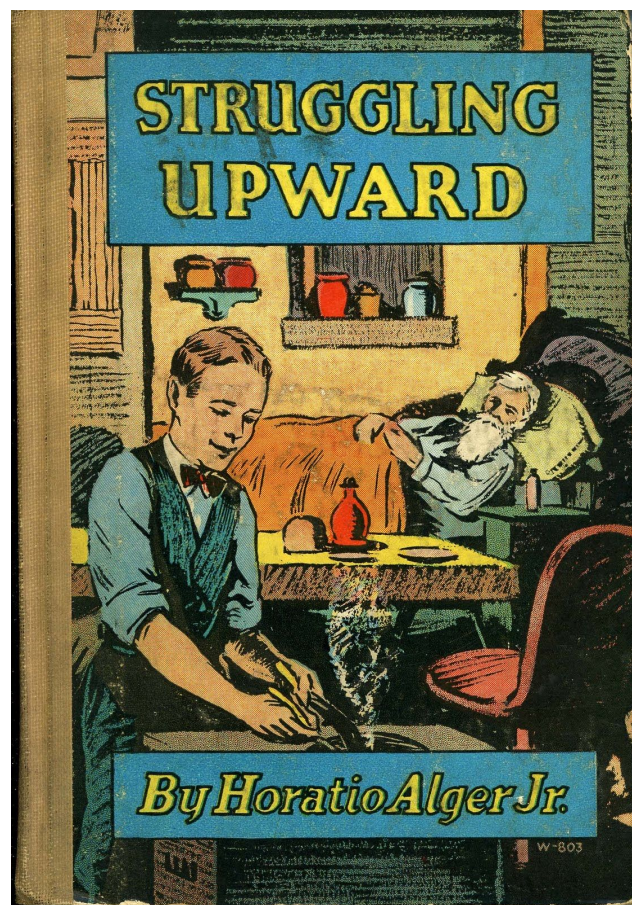
<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/social-mobility-memos/2013/12/04/what-obama-gets-right-about-social-mobility-and-what-he-gets-wrong/>.

of poverty is that it relies on a compelling emotional narrative that plays into people's perceptions of the poor. The bootstrap myth presents an image of hard-working and virtuous members of the lower class who are able to lift themselves out of poverty through perseverance and morality. This view of the working poor was popularized in the 19th Century by Horatio Alger's books and concentrates on the idea that success is readily possible for the good.⁵ Absent from this narrative of virtue leading to success, however, is its equally present, but often unspoken converse— that a lack of virtue justifies poverty or makes it acceptable.

These two ideas about the ways in which a person's nature affects how deserving they are of escaping poverty prevail because they fit exactly into the essential values of conservatism outlined in the On Being podcast "The Psychology of Self Righteousness." In the podcast, Jonathan Haidt outlines the fact that value prioritization is a central component of political belief, saying "everybody values compassion and fairness, whether you're liberal or conservative — everybody. But then there are these three others: loyalty versus betrayal, authority versus subversion, and sanctity versus degradation. And what we find is that conservatives give relatively high marks to all five of those."⁶

This conservative combination of values, particularly the focus on authority versus subversion and sanctity versus degradation, does much to explain why the bootstrap myth is uniquely appealing to conservative thinkers and notably prevalent in conservative arguments against social programs.

As mentioned earlier, the bootstrap myth and its converse divide the poor into two groups: those who are worthy of success and those who are unworthy. Crucial to the idea of being worthy of success in the bootstrap framework are the traits of a strong work ethic, moral rectitude, and perseverance.⁷ These characteristics combine to paint a portrait of a person who appeals directly to the conservative values outlined by Haidt. In having work ethic and perseverance, the protagonist of a rags to riches narrative demonstrates the value of



⁵ "Rags to Riches," in *On the Media*, October 14, 2016.

⁶ Jonathan Haidt, writer, "The Psychology of Self-Righteousness," in *On Being*, October 14, 2017.

⁷ "Rags to Riches," in *On the Media*, October 14, 2016.

authority—he or she is willing to abide by the rules, defer to the established authorities, and work within the existing framework. The moral rectitude required for being a worthy recipient of upward mobility in the bootstraps framework fulfills the conservative value of sanctity. Specifically, the hypothetical protagonist is generous, good-spirited, and pure. He or she is unwilling to sacrifice morality or purity for easy success and adheres to a strict moral values system. These traits not only make the person worthy, they also make the person appeal strongly to conservative values. Thus, conservatives frequently hold up successful instances of the bootstraps myth as an example, citing how adherence to their key values is enough to lift a person out of poverty without outside interference.⁸

Perhaps more important to understanding conservatives' skepticism of social welfare programs, however, is the idea of what makes a person unworthy of success in the bootstraps myth. Specifically, the myth happily withholds success from those who are perceived to be dishonest, law-breaking, and morally corrupt. This combination of traits has the effect of creating an image of the poor that is deeply offensive to the conservative values of authority and sanctity. The law-breaking element stands in direct opposition to the conservative value of authority, and explains why imprisoned criminals and those with criminal records are frequently denied access



to certain rights and social services. On the other hand, the supposed dishonesty and moral corruption among the poor contradict the value of sanctity, creating the image of a people who are purity-deficient and unholy. A concrete example of this deeply negative perception of the poor can be seen through the oft-used trope of the "welfare queen," a pampered, overweight women who lives high on the dole without any moral qualms and provides an evil counterpoint for Horatio Alger's pure,

kind-hearted protagonists.⁹

These two images of the poor combine to explain why the bootstraps myth is so common in conservative rhetoric as well as why conservatives are often apathetic towards social welfare programs. The myth appeals to the dearly-held conservative values of sanctity and authority, and perpetuates an image of the "worthy" and "unworthy" poor that fits directly into the conservative values system. Despite the ever-growing evidence that the myth is untrue and no longer reflects

⁸ Image 1: Horatio Alger, "Struggling Upward," digital image, <https://anticap.wordpress.com/tag/horatio-alger/>.

⁹ Image 2: "Welfare Queen," digital image, Huffington Post, March 8, 2017, accessed December 08, 2018, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/from-welfare-queen-to-black-girl-magic-how-black-women_us_58bf62ade4b070e55af9e924.

the reality of systemic injustice in the U.S., it remains relevant to conservatives because it is supported by their fundamental values and creates the image of a world that reflects those values—a world in which right begets might.

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